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Sakharov, the Exiled Star

Several years ago at a human rights demonstration in Moscow, one of the small group of anti-Soviet dissidents who dared to show up tugged at a friend's sleeve and asked, "Is Andrei Dmitriyevich here?" In answer, the other pointed to a slightly stooped, balding man whose demeanor was at once distinguished yet shy. "Thank God he's here!" exclaimed the questioner.

The scholarly physicist whose presence was so important, Andrei Dmitriyevich Sakharov, has probably seen his last protest march. The 58-year-old Nobel Peace Prize winner was arrested Jan. 22 after publicly condemning the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He has been exiled to Gorki, a drab industrial city 250 miles east of Moscow.

Latest reports indicate that Sakharov, who for years resisted the idea of leaving Russia, would now accept exile abroad if the Kremlin offered it. But the regime is believed to be firmly opposed to expulsion of its most prominent internal critic.

The CIA has concluded the intimidation of Sakharov is an admission that "the case of the dissident physicist has political and policy implications at home that outweigh any damage the action may do to the Soviet standing abroad."

So instead of letting him leave the country to become yet another vocal critic of the Soviet system, the Kremlin intends to bury him alive in places inaccessible to Western journalists.

As a dissident Soviet historian recently explained: "[The Kremlin] knows you Westerners better than you think. Your attention will be distracted and your reaction will gradually decrease. And the other dissidents, who regarded Sakharov as inviolate, will also have time to learn their lessons. Sakharov could be sent to Gorki, then maybe to Irkutsk in Siberia, Tomsk or Chita. Every time worse, every time worse."

One source who keeps in daily contact with the Russian dissident told my associate Dale Van Atta this is "the worst

time since the Soviet dissent movement started after the death of Stalin." The arrest of Sakharov came a week after the KGB seized another supposed "untouchable," Father Dmitri Dudko, a Russian Orthodox priest. The crackdown reflected the Kremlin's indifference to public opinion abroad in the wake of the Afghanistan aggression.

One reason the Soviet regime didn't take action against Sakharov sooner, a source said, was that "they hoped for a number of years he would simply die." Sakharov is known to have a weak heart, and the KGB was not above trying to strain it in cruel ways. For example, whenever a dissidents' meeting was scheduled at a certain upper-floor apartment, the building's elevator would conveniently break down, forcing Sakharov to walk up several flights.

Another reason, of course, was Sakharov's standing in the scientific community, both at home and abroad. He was, after all, instrumental in developing the Soviet hydrogen bomb, and had a solid international reputation.

A confidential CIA profile traces Sakharov's fall from grace: "[He] gradually took up dissident activities in the 1960s and was slowly cut off from his work on the Soviet nuclear program. He was fired and his security clearance lifted shortly after publication in the West during 1968 of his essay, 'Progress, Co-existence and Intellectual Freedom.' Since May 1969, he has held a low-ranking job as a part-time researcher at the Lebedev Institute of Physics in Moscow."

Sakharov was the co-founder of the dissident "democratic movement." As a member of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, he had enough prestige to unite disparate groups of dissenters.

"Sakharov's quarrel with the regime over basic principles—freedom of thought and movement—is one all these dissidents can support," the CIA noted when 37 Russian dissenters of different philosophical persuasions joined to pro-

test the Kremlin's refusal to let Sakharov accept the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in 1975. The CIA analysts predicted with ominous accuracy: "Although the burst of collective action may give Moscow pause over the short run, the dissidents' prospects over the longer run remain as grim as ever."

When another Nobel laureate, novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn, was exiled in 1974, Sakharov became the symbolic leader of the dissident movement. The CIA profile notes that he was "a more effective spokesman in the West on human rights issues than the idiosyncratic Solzhenitsyn." This was because "the strongly democratic, soberly reformist Sakharov has never subscribed to the authoritarian, nationalist outlook expressed by Solzhenitsyn."

For a time, Sakharov was assumed to be immune from serious reprisals because of his international prominence. And for a few years, the Kremlin limited its expressions of displeasure to name-calling in the official press, periodic arrests and occasional physical abuse.

But Afghanistan—and the supremacy of the Politburo hard-liners that this demonstrated—brought Sakharov's relative immunity to an end. He was effectively silenced by being put beyond the reach of Western journalists.

Unhappily, the cynical propaganda experts in the Kremlin knew what they were doing when they deprived the dissidents of their star attraction. Though the dissenters courageously continue to protest Soviet policies, they complain that Western correspondents—and their editors—aren't as interested as they were when Sakharov was on the scene.

One former correspondent explained that Sakharov's celebrity status gave "spirit and recognition" to a movement that is made up mostly of "virtually anonymous persons with polysyllabic foreign names."